

Fathers' Day 2012

## Fathers' Day Remarks

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The history and dynamics of each family are unique; a world unto itself. When my father died twenty-five years ago, and though I was by far the youngest of four siblings, my older brothers and my sister agreed that I was going to be the one to officiate and speak at his graveside service, not them. Let me put it this way: they'd spent a lot more time growing up with him and it hadn't been easy. My father carried psychic wounds of war all the days of his life after the Second World War, and self-medicated with alcohol until it contributed, eventually, to his death. He was troubled, distant, haunted, and subject to dark moods; our home life was tense whenever he was around; our relationship with him was not a happy one.

So on that beautiful, late summer afternoon when we buried him, standing before his coffin and on the verge of his grave, I remember saying that I learned a lot from him about being a father by his *not* having been a good one, and that I was trying my best to be a good dad by doing and being the opposite of my own father. We all knew Glenn, and had lived and grown up with him. The occasion of his burial on that day required some decent honesty—*that* was the task given me by my silent siblings. And so with a flag draping his coffin, and a military honour guard firing guns into the skies above that high mountain valley cemetery, we laid him to rest.

I never served in combat, lived in fear under enemy fire, nor saw comrades and foe alike maimed and slain. Thankfully, that burden carried by my father through his life was not thrust on me. Think about it. We have our own burdens, including war damaged dads with dysfunctional homes—could this be a reason why so many of us grew to abominate and oppose

war and warmongering? Why we objected and marched? Why we protest against those who “cry ‘havoc’, and let slip the dogs of war” and grieve when the kennel gates are flung open wide by heedless, hasty, thoughtless hands?

A quarter century has passed since my dad’s death. I, too, am growing old, fathered four children as he did, and made and make more than my share of parenting mistakes. At the end of the day, how many times have I apologized to one child or another for mucking up in word or deed? Countless! Parenting is not for the faint of heart, nor fathering for thin skins. And yet we have children nevertheless, many of us, and muddle through by our best lights, though dim and flickering they may be. And well we do and try, hoping to overmatch our faults with values, criticism with praise, flaws with beauty, distress with care, gloom with joy, strife with peace.

And dads, this Fathers’ Day?—: no one is born a parent, no one masters its art; we need to be able to make mistakes and make up for them and to be proud of each small parenting success. Becoming a dad is a turning point in our lives; it can raise deep questions and doubts about one’s behavior and self worth. Starting out, observes John Hoffman, a Canadian dad who writes for *Today’s Parent* magazine, it’s “not always easy for men to take the plunge” in infant care. Some think it’s “women’s territory” and “feel unsure of their ability to look after a baby.” But, he tells new fathers, if we “take a hands-on approach, right from the start, we will soon discover our own competence.” “Men,” he writes, “are sometimes urged to get involved with their babies because ‘it’s good for the child’s development’ or because ‘your wife needs your help.’ True enough, but let’s not forget how good it is for us as well.

For a child, having a father can be “stimulating” and “enriching” since each parent interacts with a child in different ways. I’ve seen this already in my son Gabe’s life when he

became a dad six months ago. He's tender, nurturing and patient—that's just the way he is—but he's also the parent who throws Jane up in air and turns her upside down to her evident delight.

In a publication by the Vanier Institute, Diane Dubeau of the Universite du Quebec noted that “a child with an involved father [does] enjoy a number of benefits. “When a father is involved with his child, the child adjusts to the school milieu more easily and exhibits better social skills, physical competency and psychological adjustment... The child is less likely to adopt stereotyped attitudes about gender roles and is more likely to demonstrate higher cognitive skills... The distinctive ways in which we interact with our kids can help promote integration outside the home, and develop self-control.” (Hoffman and Dubeau quotes from “The Importance of Fathers,” in *Transitions*, Summer 2002, v.32, number 2, pp. 6, 8-11)

In the ten years since Dubeau made these observations, research studies in family systems and child psychology have provided a growing body of evidence that supports the importance of fathers and father figures and their contributions in creating a richer landscape of care in the lives of growing children from infancy to adulthood. One of the most important benefits of engaged fathering, according to the authors of a study on child development for the US Department of Health and Human Services, is the quality of the relationship of adult couples with children. “A positive relationship between mother and father,” according to this report,

is crucial in the “behavior it models for children. Fathers who treat the mothers of their children with respect and deal with conflict within the relationship in an adult and appropriate manner are more likely to have boys who understand how they are to treat women and who are less likely to act in an aggressive fashion toward females. Girls with involved, respectful fathers see how they should expect men to treat them and are less likely to become involved in violent or unhealthy relationships.” (Rosenberg and Wilcox, “The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006, pp.11-12. See also, “How Do Fathers Fit In?” Dec. 2001, a publication of Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society, at [www.civitas.org.uk](http://www.civitas.org.uk))

So to all the fathers and father figures out there: here's my closing shout out to us on this Fathers' Day. Let's do our part in raising and nurturing our kids. Let's discover our own competencies, our ways of expressing love and care. We rise in the middle of night and go

through our days holding and feeding our infants and changing their diapers—and help them learn about attachment and empathy that knows no boundaries between genders. Let’s keep roughhousing with our kids where they can learn their own strength, problem solving skills and emotional self-control. Let’s keep reading to them out-loud and thus share with them the mysterious joys and richness of story-telling, of seeing their own lives in terms of the narrative of growing into adulthood. As our children grow into adolescents and teenagers, let’s marvel at and support the compelling diversity and growing depth of their emotional, physical and mental life—and to be there for them without stern and censoring judgment.

And this, I have to say: How I admire those parents, women and men, who have the smarts and wisdom of letting kids be kids; who don’t burden their children with our adult worries, with the conflicts in our adult relationships, with our anxieties over work and money, and end of the world scenarios. Growing up is hard enough as it is; let’s exercise patience, restraint, and wisdom to let our children grow up in their own due time. “Sufficient unto the day [and season of life] is the evil thereof”...and the good. May we know the difference!

Fathers! Our influence can be good and great and lasting. Let’s embrace our roles, learn from our mistakes, find our competencies, and be a blessing to our children and to the children and grandchildren, from infant to adult, in our lives so that they, in their time, may arise and call down their own blessings upon us. And may it be so. Amen.